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By Barbara S. Miller

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Crude oil prices were escalating after an Arab oil embargo, so Congress increased the efficiency of new cars and lowered the speed limit to 55 mph from 65 on interstate highways. Cardigan-clad President Jimmy Carter encouraged Americans to lower their thermostats to conserve fuel.

The price at the pump had escalated from the 30-some-cent range to \$1.20 a gallon and the jump sent the economy into a tailspin.

Due largely to conservation measures, the demand for oil declined and so did the price of crude.

Although U.S. Rep. John Murtha, D-Johnstown, recalls those years as a young congressman elected in 1974, he doesn't expect history to repeat itself, saying we can't quickly conserve our way out of the current energy crisis because of today's global economy.

"The problem we have today is, China is going to take every extra bit of oil that is available, so there's no easy solution to it. We have to start working on alternative fuels and capture the CO2," Murtha said Thursday on a visit to Allegheny Technologies Inc., as traffic sped by the Jessop Place exit of Interstate 70.

With gasoline prices topping \$4 a gallon, Americans may be taking a "staycation" this year rather than jumping into their cars during the Fourth of July long weekend.

"In the '70s and '80s when the price of oil went from \$30 a barrel to

\$10 a barrel, everything fell apart," said Murtha, 76. "I don't see it coming down again. We're the most energy-intensive country in the world."

Instead, Murtha, who said he has voted in favor of drilling for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Reserve and off-shore drilling, is calling for medium- to longer-term solutions, such as development of solar and wind power and broader use of coal, provided its greenhouse gas doesn't escape into the atmosphere.

Murtha is chairman of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense. While his private, lunchtime meeting at the ATI offices focused on the corporation's technological advancements and its lighter-weight armor that is less penetrable to improvised explosive devices, he was more than amenable to talking politics.

A strong supporter of Sen. Hillary Clinton's for their party's presidential nomination, Murtha sees both pluses and minuses in a Barack Obama-Clinton ticket in the fall.

"I think it would help Obama, I think in Pennsylvania in particular. People are still trying to make up their mind about who should be the vice president. They still are very hesitant to agree to go along with Obama, so I think it would be very helpful.

"I've talked to a lot of women who still have not made up their mind. Of course, George Bush is a heavy burden, so it's hard for me to believe in the end they would vote for (Sen. John) McCain, but I think she would help the ticket. It could be somebody who can win a state that's important. She's from New York. That's a disadvantage to her, because he's going to win New York no matter what.

"So I would say she'd be helpful nationwide, and she's certainly a good campaigner. I've never seen anybody campaign like she does. My goodness, she wore me out, I'll tell you that."

Murtha's stop in Washington County came after an announcement at the Mon Valley community of Braddock, where he touted the Lower Monongahela River Project, including Locks and Dams 2-4.

The \$1.2 billion multi-year project includes construction of a new gated dam at Braddock, construction of two new locks at Charleroi,

removal of the Elizabeth
locks and dams as well as channel dredging.

To date, Murtha has advocated \$488 million for this project. The House Appropriations Committee last week approved an additional \$40.8 million for the Lower Monongahela River Project in fiscal year 2009. This funding was expected to be sharply reduced, but Murtha, in Canton Township, said he pushed for full funding, mostly because of the "218,000 jobs either directly or indirectly related, and, of course, the billions of dollars worth of commerce that goes down the water."

The Cambria County Democrat faces a challenge in the fall from William Russell, 45, who won a Republican write-in campaign to appear on the ballot despite being bounced last winter for too few valid signatures on nominating petitions.

The 12th Congressional District includes all of Greene County and parts of Washington, Allegheny, Armstrong, Cambria, Fayette, Indiana, Somerset and Westmoreland counties.